

Lili Kraus: The First Lady Of The Piano

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Article:

Until her death in 1986, Lili Kraus was one of the greatest pianists and teachers of the twentieth century. She was widely regarded as the foremost living interpreter of the piano music of Haydn, Schubert, and especially Mozart, the composer with whose name she became inextricably linked. Mme. Kraus, as she was known throughout the world, was a fabulous musician, an actress with a charismatic stage-presence, a linguist who conversed easily in seven languages, an athlete, and a human being who loved all life with a passion. She was, in short, one of the truly fascinating personalities, and her life story is the stuff movies are made of.

Born in Budapest on March 4, 1903, in impoverished circumstances, Kraus was groomed for a career as a performing artist from her earliest recollections onwards. Her mother, a frustrated singer, steered her daughter away from a career as a dancer, deciding instead that she should become a pianist. At age six, Kraus started piano lessons. By eight, she accepted her first piano student and entered the Royal Academy of Music in Budapest, creating a sensation there in her audition. During the course of her work at the Academy, Kraus studied theory with Zoltán Kodály and piano with the renowned Béla Bartók. At seventeen, she was graduated with highest honors and went to the Academy of Music in Vienna. There she studied piano with Severin Eisenberger, a Leschetitzky student, completing in one year the normally three-year Masterclass. The next year she studied contemporary music with Edward Steuermann, an early disciple of Schoenberg and interpreter of his music. In 1923, Kraus accepted a teaching position at the Vienna Academy, becoming a full professor there at the tender young age of twenty.

While in Vienna, Kraus met Otto Mandl, a wealthy mining engineer and philosopher. On October 31, 1930, they were married, and he sold his business in order to devote him-self to the furtherance of Kraus's career. So that they could be nearer to Schnabel, Kraus and Mandl moved to Berlin in 1930.

In that city their children, Ruth and Michael, were born. In early 1932, the family moved to an historic manor house over-looking the Lago di Como near Tremezzo, Italy. There they remained until late 1938. The approach of World War II prompted their flight from that idyllic setting in Italy to London where they lived for a year before moving to Amsterdam. In 1940, the entire family embarked from Holland on a world tour that was to have begun in Indonesia and culminated with Kraus's American debut in San Francisco in 1941.

The Japanese invasion of Singapore altered the family's travel plans, though, making any venture beyond the shores of Indonesia too risky. After the Japanese took Indonesia, the family was left alone at first, but in June, 1943, Kraus was arrested and imprisoned on fabricated charges. Her husband and children were subsequently jailed in separate camps, so that for nearly one year they knew nothing about one another's fate. During that time, Kraus lived in the most hostile conditions, subsisting on two cups of rice daily and sentenced to hard labor. Toward the end of that confinement, she was allowed to play on the camp commander's piano for one hour a week. Finally, due to the efforts of a Japanese conductor who had heard Kraus play in Tokyo in 1936, the family was reunited in a privileged camp in Djakarta in 1944. Kraus was also given a piano. Two years later, in August, 1945, the family was freed and two months later flown to Australia and then to New Zealand.

Despite the hardships that Kraus experienced in the concentration camps, she nonetheless felt that her imprisonment had been a time of immense personal and musical growth for which she was grateful.

She concertized intensely during the eighteen months following the war. Upon returning to Europe in 1948 and making her first recording since the 1930s, she was shocked to discover how undisciplined her playing had become. Following intensive work, she played her long-delayed American debut recital in New York in 1949 to great critical acclaim. That same year she and Mandl moved to South Africa where she taught at a university in Capetown from 1949 until 1950.

After leaving South Africa, Kraus and Mandl lived in Paris, then Vienna, and finally Nice, France, where Mandl died in 1956. Kraus moved back to London and continued touring alone.

Along with her daughter and son-in-law, Kraus moved to the United States in 1967, living first in Minnesota before building a permanent home in the North Carolina mountains in 1969.

Kraus was appointed artist-in-residence at Texas Christian University in 1967, a position she held until her retirement in 1983. Her performing career also ended a year before that, a bow to the crippling rheumatoid arthritis that afflicted every joint in her body. After 1983 until her death three years later, she lived on her North Carolina estate and then at a nursing home in nearby Asheville, fighting the arthritis and intestinal problems that led to five major surgeries in the last ten months of her life.

As for Kraus's career, that started with a concerto performance in the Hague in 1920 when the pianist was seventeen years old. The conductor for that performance did not like to rehearse with the soloist before hand, so Kraus had to perform without ever having played with the orchestra. Since then, her performing and recording career continued unabated until 1982, with the exception of the three-year hiatus prompted by her imprisonment. During the first years of her career, she specialized in the repertoire of Chopin, but by the early 1930s, after she and the violinist Saymon Goldberg began touring Europe and recording the Beethoven Violin-Piano Sonatas, she became known as a Beethoven player. When shortly thereafter she made her first Mozart recording, though, her fame as a forwarder of that composer's music grew, and she and Goldberg began programming the Mozart Piano-Violin Sonatas. Kraus then recorded a great deal of the Mozart solo piano, concerto, and chamber music repertoire for Parlophone.

After the war, Kraus began the second phase of her career, playing in Europe, North and South America, Japan, India, and the Antipodes. In 1954, she received a commission to record much of Mozart's solo, chamber, and concerted piano works for French firm, Les Discophiles Francais.

In 1963, Kraus engaged Alix Williamson of New York as her personal representative, and her career advanced rapidly. She recorded the Mozart piano concertos in 1965 and 1966 in Vienna and then played them all in an unprecedented nine-concert series in New York during the 1966-67 season. The critical acclaim generated by these performances led to an engagement to perform and record the Mozart piano sonatas the following season.

Among the many highlights of her career, Kraus cited a royal command performance at the wedding banquet for the Shah of Iran, the presentation of the first secular recital at Canterbury Cathedral, the first concert in the new city of Brasilia, appearances at the Royal Moroccan Mozart Festival and the Mostly Mozart Festival in New York, and participation in a concert at London's Royal Festival Hall honoring Bertrand Russell. She was also the only permanent member of the Van Cliburn International Competition jury since its inception in 1962. Roosevelt University and Texas Christian University bestowed honorary doctorates on Kraus, and Austria awarded her its highest citation for outstanding achievement.

Reviews of Kraus's live performance and recordings agree on several characteristics that distinguished her playing. Traits that reviewers consistently cited over six decades included technical fluency that emphasized each note, tonal beauty, drama, careful attention to phrasing, vivid dynamic contrasts, vigorous accents, highly individualistic ideas, lack of concern for pedantry where ornamentation is concerned, projection of absolute conviction, improvisatory spirit and captivating charisma.

She had distinctive ideas about practice, memorizing, objectivity, ornamentation, style, success, fulfillment, imagination, spontaneity, love, and the unselfish stewardship of that which she considered to be her divine gift. Technically, Kraus devised an approach based on relaxation, firm fingers, loose wrists, weight transfer, and an exacting choreography. Kraus's ideas where about the music of Mozart, the amour of her life, were very emphatic:

To say that Mozart should be played delicately is to say that life should only have pink pastel and blue pastel colors – no ups and downs; that it should be white, serene, not too happy, please, but just nice, comfortable, pleasant, charming. As we all know, there are no depths of unhappiness, tragedy, frustration, anger that haven't touched Mozart to the core – likewise no bliss that he has not experienced...

Only people who are conventionally and superficially acquainted with Mozart can ever come to the idea that he should be played delicately or lifelessly – prettily. Never, never, never!¹

As a teacher, Kraus felt that the contemporary environment has taken from young pianists the heritage of the interpretive practices of the Classic and Romantic periods. In her pedagogical efforts, she was intent on transmitting the living tradition that she learned principally from Bartok and Schnabel.

Lili Kraus was among the generation of pianists known as the last of the Romantics. She played in the grand manner; she also lived her life that way. Her records, and she made more than one hundred of them, provide eloquent evidence of the marvelous excellence of Kraus's musical vision and the fluency of her technique. Critics hailed her as a giant among concert pianists, and her legacy will live on in the many students she influenced in the course of her long life. This woman, about whom television shows have been made and radio broadcast dedicated, made a remarkable contribution to the music world, and she will not soon be forgotten.

Notes:

¹ Richard Freed, "Lili Kraus: Mozartean," Stereo Review, February 1975, p. 76